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SUBJECT: SLAM DUNK IN YAKUTIA

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¶1. (U) Former NBA Coach Tom Newell brought his basketball diplomacy to Yakutia April 22-29 for a week of seminars for coaches, practice sessions for boys and girls, and exhibition games. CG joined Newell for a game with local public officials dedicated to WWII veterans. CG also visited a Yakutia hospital that has improved its infant and maternal mortality rates thanks to an extremely successful USAID program, met with local officials, and celebrated the April 27 Day of the Republic. CG's wife met with students and English teachers and the Consulate delegation enjoyed reindeer meat and mare's milk, a ride on a Yakutsk horse, and a tour of a permafrost museum where the temperature was minus nine centigrade.

FIVE PUSHUPS

¶2. (U) Tom Newell's basketball clinics emphasize community involvement and the positive role sports play in youth development. His humor and hands on skills-development training produces long term results and is an immediate public diplomacy "slam dunk." Newell believes in "simplicity and execution," teaching coaching and students about good and bad habits in basketball while making points about leadership, teamwork, dedication and commitment. Newell often lightens the mood by requiring "five pushups" for minor discipline infractions, like showing up for practice late. Coaches and players recognize that Newell is making a point that is understandable in any language. The "Newell Yakutia All Stars," including real coaches, beat the CG's team of Yakutia regional officials. Most of the players in that game were in the over-50 "knee brace set" but no one was hurt and the game dedicated to veterans was high spirited. Regional officials had as much chance of winning as the Washington Generals do against the Harlem Globetrotters but they were all good sports. Yakutia is a very sports conscious town, hosting Asian Youth Games every four years and remaining active year-round, even during the winter with its minus fifty degree temperatures. Basketball is popular, but young people over six feet tall are rare. Newell found this out as he often hit his head on the low ceilings designed for a shorter population. CG discussed sports with Vice President Mikhailova who said that seventy percent of Yakutians are active in sports, with wrestling, boxing and volleyball being most popular.

USAID IMPROVING HEALTH STATISTICS

¶3. (U) At the Republican Perinatal Center, CG saw just how successful a USAID program has been in lowering infant mortality. However, young women -- even pregnant ones -- still smoke heavily and Yakutia is badly in need of anti-narcotics, alcohol and smoking programs. Mikhailova made a special request for a US speaker on anti-smoking campaigns. On the positive side, she cited USAID's Maternal and Child Health Initiative as being directly responsible for Yakutia's population growth. Yearly deaths outnumbered live births just ten years ago, but

Yakutia now has a positive demographic balance. Women typically have six or seven children, so maternal health programs are vital to this young population.

CRISIS NOT AS SEVERE

¶4. (U) On the economy, Mikhailova said the Republic is trying to diversify away from simply extractive industries like gold, silver, and diamond mining, though to its credit Yakutia does not export these as raw materials and has a significant processing industry. There are diamond cutting and finishing factories in Yakutia and seemingly a jewelry store on every block. CG pitched an American product to give greater traction to automobiles in snow to local leaders. Other than in the mining sector, there is not a lot of American business in Yakutia. In fact, there are only four known Americans living in Yakutia, all of them missionaries, and one of them living in a remote village accessible only by plane. Almost all contacts said that the "crisis" was not as strong in Yakutia, where unemployment for the moment remains fairly low. Sister city ties with Fairbanks, Alaska are not as vibrant as in the 1990's but a Fairbanks delegation is expected in June to celebrate the Yakutian New Year.

SAKHA OR YAKUTIA?

¶5. (U) Yakutians number about 450,000 and are one of the major minorities in the Russian Federation. Their culture and language is strong, with several radio stations broadcasting in Yakutian. Yakutia is known as "Sakha" in the local language, which is spoken frequently in schools, but there is an ongoing debate as to whether students studying physics and other hard sciences are disadvantaged by not taking these courses in Russian. Doing so would provide more access to scientific materials. There is no "political correctness" to using the

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term "Sakha" or "Yakutia". Either is accepted. English is officially the third language of the Republic and indeed many young people speak it well. CG's spouse met with English students and teachers who are very hungry for native English speakers and asked for assistance in bringing more English teachers to the Republic.

¶6. (U) The "Day of the Republic" event showcased how the local, Russian and global cultures interact. A reading of Pushkin could be followed by a modern adaptation of native dance, followed by a hip hop number. Russians and Yakutians share positions of power in the Republic and intermarry frequently. Horses figure prominently in Sakha culture and are considered sacred, although horse meat is widely available. Yakutian horses are smaller and can survive on their own in winter by pawing through the snow to reach fresh grass. Mare's milk is served at most restaurants and is offered to guests at official ceremonies.

COOL MUSEUM

¶7. (U) A "must see" in Yakutia is the permafrost museum. The museum is in an old Soviet bunker built into a hillside in the permafrost. Visitors go from room to room where fabulous ice sculptures capture native legends or in one case recreate a modern office made entirely of ice, many sculptures were featured in Harbin's annual ice festival. The temperature in the museum is minus nine in summer and minus 17 in winter, when many Yakutians visit to "warm up" since outside air temperatures are often minus 50 or below. The permafrost museum also runs a restaurant with old hunting relics and wildlife trophies on the wall. To complete the northern scene, some of Yakutia's award-winning malamute sled dogs are housed outside and visitors are able to scratch them behind the ears and admire their markings and cool blue eyes. Yakutia also boasts a beautiful zoo with musk oxen that were introduced from Canada, bears, arctic wolves, and

other creatures from Yakutia and around the world. The zoo is also seeking American partners. Yakutia is one of Russia's richest republics, in terms of size, wealth, and culture and is well worth a visit.

ARMBRUSTER